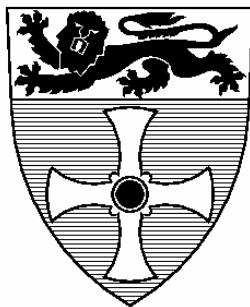


Department of Education

UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE



**Focusing on the individual while
ignoring the context:
An Evaluation of an Attendance Project**

A Research Report

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Preface

The main purpose of the research was to evaluate a local Attendance Project during the Autumn of 1996. In order to retain a sense of anonymity for both the project involved, and the participants, we have refrained from identifying the project by name and have referred to it as 'The Attendance Project' throughout this report. A local school featured in the research is referred to simply as a 'Community College'.

Quotes About Truancy

There is clear evidence to prove that we can identify children at a very young age - perhaps as young as five or six - who are in danger of turning to crime. The children who play truant - who don't go to school and so get no education. ... There is clearly a need for parents, local education authorities, the police and the local community to cut down sharply on truancy. The truancy league tables will help act as a spur to those schools which fail to take their responsibilities seriously.

(Speech by Rt. Hon Baroness Blatch to the Conservative Local Government Conference Dinner on Friday 16th February, 1996).

By lifting standards and creating a space for children we will also start to tackle truancy and exclusion. Those who truant often become involved in crime. A Home Office survey found that 78% of males and 53% of females, who truant at least once a week, committed offences.

(David Blunkett, 1995).

A notable feature of the 'news' about school non-attendance is for example, the nature of the language, which evokes deep seated concerns about order and control, proper parenting, the work ethic, crime and much else, reinforcing the 'suspicious state of isolation' in which the 'deviant' is viewed (Durkheim 1972).

(Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh 1992, p.39).

... if the incidence of truancy looks set to rise, this may have more to do with government policies (and the effect of poverty and unemployment) than with pupils, families and schools who are currently bear the brunt of the blame.

(Gleeson, 1994, p.15).

Executive Summary

Summary of the full report

Background Information

- School attendance and truancy is a complex problem arising from individual student personality, family circumstance and school environment. However, within each of those categories there is little agreement in research studies on which factors are crucial both to identifying and understanding the potential or actual truant and which course of action could be taken. (Introduction)
- The number of young people involved in the Attendance Project - eleven - is small when set against the number of pupils at the Community College - over 1 400 - or, indeed, the number in Year 9 alone (271). In other words, the group involved is 0.04% of the Year group and 0.008% of the whole Community College pupil population.
- The Attendance Project evolved from an initial plan to have a Curriculum Development Officer as part of the Educational Achievement Strategy (EAS) Project Team. There are differences in perception of the primary rationale of the Project. At its simplest level of interpretation, this difference in perceived rationales is between
 - * making changes which permeate the curriculum and support access across the curriculum for traditionally disadvantaged groups; and
 - * focusing on the disadvantaged as individuals while leaving the curriculum untouched. (Section 1)
- Statistics relating to school attendance provide a clear picture of the problem faced in the West of the City. Not surprisingly there was general agreement among all the people with whom we were able to talk during the research that non-attendance in the local area was an important issue needing to be addressed. (Section 2)
- The proposed referral criteria were aimed at young people who attended school erratically rather than long-term non-attenders. This distinction, between erratic attenders and non-attenders, appears to have been lost during the referral process. Some of the referrals to the Project had not, in fact, attended school at all for some time. (Section 2)

- Schooling patterns were very similar among the young people we interviewed. All had attended a nursery or play school and all reported a positive, happy experience. For the majority of the group, primary school was also a happy time. All but one young person said they had full attendance at primary school, enjoyed the work and liked the teachers. (Section 2)
- There were some recurrent features in the patterns of attendance which had brought young people into the Project. Early problems with health, low academic attainment and erratic attendance were accompanied, for some, by bullying ending in complete non-attendance. (Section 2)
- When asked about their views of the Attendance Project as a whole, the young people responded very positively. (Section 2)
- It would appear that the Attendance Project does cater for a group who would benefit from some form of educational intervention beyond that normally available in school. The young people and their families involved in the Project seem to value the experience. (Section 2)

The Findings

- It would seem that in relation to the parents, the Attendance Project has the following outcomes. It has:
 - * managed to involve at least some of the parents in what happens to their children at the Project. Many of these are unlikely to have been involved previously in their school life;
 - * helped as a catalyst for the other support agencies working with the young people and their families; and
 - * provided some tangible signs of progress in the education of their children for the parents. (Section 3)
- It would seem that in relation to the young people involved, the Attendance Project has the following outcomes. It has:
 - * improved the school attendance of the majority of the participants, including reintegrating several back into mainstream education;
 - * provided continued support for the young people upon their reintegration back into education;
 - * developed the self esteem and confidence of many of the young people; and

- * contributed to a perception of improvement in the literacy of some of the young people. (Section 3)
- The Attendance Project, therefore, would appear to have achieved some identifiable outcomes in relation to both young people and their parents during the time that it has been operating. (Section 3)
- The research sought to evaluate the work of the Attendance Project against its own terms of reference. In these terms, the Project has been successful and this success is acknowledged by the stakeholders consulted during the evaluation. (Conclusion)
- In terms of its contribution to the success of the overall EAS Project, any evaluation must conclude that the impact of the Attendance Project is negligible. There appears to have been no input, for whatever reason, into the review and development of the curriculum at the Community College nor of its pastoral and student support systems. Given the size of the attendance problem and the cultural and structural dimensions of schooling that influence non-attendance this is a glaring omission. (Conclusion)
- The issue of 'value for money' is complex. It would be impossible to do a complete cost-benefit analysis since these are always comparative. They require the definition of alternatives to be compared and an identification of the limits of the comparison. However, accepting these caveats, in relation to the effective use of available funding for tackling the educational priorities of the area and the other ways in which that funding might have been used, it would be reasonable to conclude that the Project does not represent value for money. (Conclusion)

Recommendations

In the light of the discussion in this report, we recommend that:

1. Any future work on non-attendance in this area addresses both the problems of particular non-attenders **and** the curricular, pedagogical and pastoral issues within the Community College which will enable returning young people to feel more at ease in the College and more able to access the curriculum.
2. The expertise of teachers within the College and the Learning Support Service be utilised to ensure the highest quality of support available within literacy and numeracy provision for project participants prior to reintegration.

3. The facilities, including the technology, of the Access Centre at the Community College be used actively to support the reintegration of non-attenders.

4. If the Attendance Project continues, the Curriculum Development Worker designs further developments in line with recommendations 1-3 above.
5. If the Attendance Project continues, staff at the Community College concentrate their referrals on erratic attenders rather long-term non-attenders.
6. Serious consideration be given to preventative work in primary schools in order to anticipate and prevent later hard-core absenteeism as this may represent better value for money.

Introduction to the Report

The Department of Education at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne was contracted to undertake an evaluation of the Attendance Project in the Autumn of 1996. A fuller account of the purpose and methodology of the evaluation is provided in Appendix 1, but essentially the intention was to evaluate the work of the Attendance Project in relation to the aims and objectives established for the Attendance Project when it was set up. The evaluation team sought to do this by gathering accounts of those with experience of the Project in one form or another and by analysing documentation. Inevitably, much of what we report concerns perceptions; it is, however, a truism that when things are perceived as real, they are real in their consequences. The report then sets this within the wider context of the costs of the Project and the work of the Educational Achievement Strategy (EAS).

School attendance and truancy is a complex problem. A major recent review of research and projects on this theme (Bell, Rosen and Dynlacht, 1994), for example, points up the difficulties of defining causes. For not only may truancy be regarded as tripartite in origin - arising from individual student personality, family circumstance and school environment - but within those categories, there is little agreement on which factors are crucial both to identifying and understanding the potential or actual truant, and which course of action could be taken. Elements of personality ranging from school phobia, conduct disorder, poor academic skills and resentment of the power relationship with staff are all considered to be contributory and, indeed, could be seen to be mutually generating. In addition, an analysis of recent statements by British policy-makers seems to suggest a move away in current thinking from seeking to deal with the long-term disaffected students who truant towards a focus on those who do turn up (at least to some extent) and those with less intractable problems. This, however, does not mean that the former group cease to exist, nor that their existence should not remain a source of personal and social concern. Inevitably, decisions about whom to target and what to do about them are related to the most effective use of finite resources.

As evaluators we would be naive not to acknowledge the politics of the context in which decisions about the future development of the Attendance Project takes place. These decisions may well be interpreted in terms of such things as the distribution of power between the various stakeholders and various ideological stances. At the same time, the EAS Project and the Local Education Authority (LEA) itself has to operate within legal frameworks

concerning school attendance. It also has a moral obligation to the participants of its programmes and their families, at the very minimum, to cause them no educational damage either intentionally or unintentionally, short-term or long-term.

The number of young people involved in the Attendance Project - eleven - is small when set against the number of pupils at the Community College - over 1,400 - or, indeed, the number in Year 9 alone (271). In other words, the group involved is 0.04% of the Year group and 0.008% of the whole Community College pupil population. There seems little doubt that the young people involved are an educationally-deprived group 'at risk' in a cycle of failure. The dilemma is how best to reconcile their short and longer term interests with the imperatives of the wider educational system in which, eventually, these young people will need to perform if they are to access the opportunities in this society that are now so strongly linked to education.

Section 1

The emergence of the Attendance Project

In this section we set the context for the Attendance Project and describe its emergence from a somewhat amorphous remit. We consider this to be essential as a backcloth to the evaluation itself. We then describe the aims and objectives of the Attendance Project before summarising the main features of the work of the Project as we understand them from the available documentation and the accounts provided to us.

The Context for the Attendance Project

School attendance is a matter both of national and of local concern. Within the city there have been several initiatives seeking to address the problem. One of these, the Raising Attendance Project, overlapped to some extent with the start of the Educational Achievement Strategy (EAS) Project and had clear relevance to the issues that the latter sought to address:

the EAS work links to the activities of the Attendance Project which has been extremely helpful to many schools in terms of freeing up resources to enable teachers to take part in attendance workshops. Although the EAS does not provide funding for an Attendance and Punctuality Worker, it has provided support for attendance-related work through its funding of a Transition Support Worker and a Curriculum Development Worker (Wilkinson, 1996, P.3).

In the EAS documentation outlining the Strategy this theme is developed:

Truancy and non-attendance at school have a detrimental effect on achievement. The Strategy aims to develop new ways to make attendance at school attractive to young people (EAS, 1995, p.8).

The Attendance Project, then, has relevance to the work of the Educational Achievement Strategy, funded by City Challenge, which is focused on the West of the city. This is important for two reasons:

1. It provides a wider context for the work of the Attendance Project itself. The EAS Project was designed to tackle a fundamental educational problem in the West of the city, namely "the cycle of low expectation and low achievement". It was seen as "a targeted approach to breaking into the cycle of under achievement at points that most of the stakeholders agree are critical". The

cycle itself (see Figure 1.) was conceptualised as consisting of a number of factors and was expressed diagrammatically in Project literature.

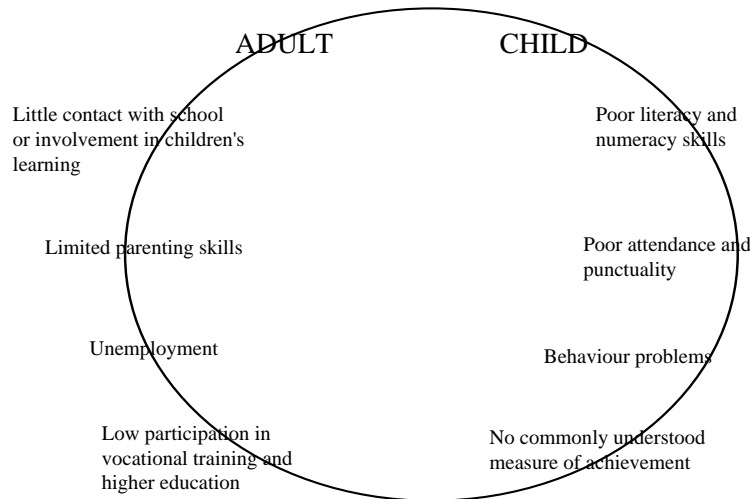


Figure 1.

The adult/child cycle of educational deprivation

The relationship of the Attendance Project to the EAS is unclear. What is clear, however, is that the Attendance Project could have had a definite contribution to make to the overall success of the Strategy through its focus on a critical point in the cycle as conceptualised by those who designed the Educational Achievement Strategy.

2. The theme of 'partnership' is a strong feature of the EAS Project. Founded on partnership (between City Challenge and the City Education Service), the development of partnerships at a variety of levels was seen as an important working principle of the Strategy. It is clear, therefore, that the Attendance Project might be expected to function in a similar way.

From Curriculum Development to Attendance

The Attendance Project evolved from an initial plan to have a Curriculum Development Worker as part of the EAS Project Team. Originally, the EAS Curriculum Development Worker post was seen as being:

... responsible for establishing initiatives which will inform the development of the curriculum and its delivery at the Community College through contact with the Strategy, local parents, young people and relevant agencies (from the original remit).

By early 1996 the Curriculum Development Project Worker was expressing concerns about "*... a number of general issues ... (which) ... have had a major impact on my work to date and have made it difficult to effectively progress this project*" (Review document). Negotiations resulted in a change of emphasis in the Project Worker's role; in effect enabling her to develop the work in ways in which she considered more appropriate. From this emerged the Attendance Project. It is worth placing this change in focus within the wider context of recent developments in the LEA.

The local LEA clearly has a problem of low levels of attendance and these are particularly pronounced in the West of the City. Measures had been put in place to address the problem, the most significant being the Raising Attendance Project (RAP) and the Educational Achievement Strategy (EAS). The City Challenge funded EAS (1993 to 1997) focused on 21 schools (4 nurseries, 16 primary and one secondary school) in the West of the City and saw attendance as one of ten key areas contributing to raising educational attainment. The RAP, a DfEE Truancy and Disaffected Pupils GEST Programme, ran from 1993 to 1996 with a more specific attendance brief covering much the same geographical area and initially targeted on the three existing secondary schools.

A spin-off of the RAP was the 'Bridge Course', a full-time, off-site course aimed at year eleven pupils who were considered at risk of dropping out of school during their final year. The 'bridge' was seen as leading pupils from the course into further training and a return to school was not a stated aim of the Project. Although the RAP was not extended at the end of the GEST funding, the Bridge course continues to operate within the LEA from a local base.

The Attendance Project has developed some of the same approaches as the Bridge Course, which is considered successful by the LEA, but its primary aim is to build a bridge back into the mainstream curriculum at the Community College. It is worth charting the route by which the Project developed into this style of off-site provision, which appears to be significantly different to the original intentions of the strategy. In doing so, a series of fairly central questions arise:

- What was the initial starting point of the Project?
- What was the initial rationale behind the Project?

- What were the processes through which the Project moved away from its initial intentions?
- In re-casting the Project into a different mould, have the initial aims been met or did a different set of aims take over?
- If different aims were identified, were these better in any sense than the original ones given the nature of the underlying problem?
- Has the Project made an impact on the problems of low attendance in the localised area?

The Attendance Project developed from those aspects of the EAS that concentrated on the period of transition from the primary sector to the Community College. Problems in transition had long been identified as marking a turning point in patterns of attendance and were a specific overlapping focus of EAS and RAP. The post of Curriculum Development Worker was originally designated to "*work with local communities and the Community College to develop current curriculum approaches particularly around the areas of drugs, crime, training and employment*". The intention was to highlight aspects of the curriculum, both academic and pastoral, which discouraged attendance in certain identifiable groups.

In tracing the path by which the role of the Curriculum Development Worker became located in a discrete project with apparently difficult relationships with the host school and the LEA, differences in perception of the primary rationale of the Project are brought into sharp focus. At its simplest level of interpretation, this difference in perceived rationales is between:

- making changes which permeate the curriculum and support access across the curriculum for traditionally disadvantaged groups; and
- focusing on the disadvantaged as individuals while leaving the curriculum untouched.

In essence this is the picture which appears to have developed in the Attendance Project.

It is possible to track the development of the Project through several phases. At each stage the starting point is taken from the reports written by the Curriculum Development Worker. These are cross referenced with the views of other key people gathered during the evaluation.

The Project did not begin as a discrete entity with a single focus but as a three-pronged approach to a range of what were clearly seen as the most pressing issues concerning young people in the area and their education. The initial

impetus was to take the form of a curriculum initiative with a designated worker.

The early work was to be tied to the Community College Action Plan and to be delivered mainly through the medium of the year 10 Personal and Social Education (P.S.E.) programme. The second prong involved the setting up of a non-attendance pilot project which would work around the key themes selected for the P.S.E. strand, i.e., self esteem, work and training links, social issues and drugs education. The third prong is perhaps more accurately identified as a strand running through the whole programme and this entailed collaborative work towards establishing a co-ordinated drugs work strategy. The framework supporting the initiative followed a City Challenge-style format and the milestones for completing aspects of the work ran more or less in parallel.

A review of the Curriculum Development Project as it was then called, presented by the Curriculum Development Worker after six months in post, revealed that, from her point of view, all was not well. The main problems identified by the Curriculum Development Worker at this stage revolved around:

1. A lack of collaboration between the partners stemming from different perspectives on the direction of the work and the nature of the appointment.
2. A perceived lack of support from the EAS management.
3. A perceived difference in the focus of the work, which the Curriculum Development Worker identified as community based as distinct from the predominantly school-based focus of the EAS.
4. The beginning of the work coincided with the hiatus between the college's Ofsted inspection, the arrival of a new principal and the implementation of a revised Action Plan.
5. Perceived problems with the status, content, resourcing and delivery of P.S.E. in the curriculum.
6. Perceived communication problems with teachers involved in the P.S.E. programme.
7. A slow start to the drugs education aspect of the initiative with problems stemming from difficulties with the co-ordinating aspects of the issue.

The Curriculum Development Worker summarised the root cause of difficulties at this stage as the:

large divide separating the two partners and this is largely down to differing expectations and perspectives regarding the role of the Curriculum Development Worker.

Her solution was to propose the development of a 'community strategy' focused mainly on issues of non-attendance with a specific area remit and an equal emphasis on parents. The main partners in delivering this were to be youth workers. In effect, the Curriculum Development Worker had negotiated a re-defined job, losing the curriculum input to the College and concentrating her efforts on setting up an off-site, non-attendance project. This 'large divide' of differing perceptions of the primary rationale of the post to which she had referred, essentially an ideological divide, had assumed a physical dimension.

The LEA perspective recognised the frustrations and the conflicting expectations between the Community College and the local Strategy that the Curriculum Development Worker had struggled to meet. In a sense, an impasse was reached and appears to have been resolved, mainly on the Curriculum Development Worker's terms. The change of focus allowed the Project to build on the transition work established by the EAS Transition Worker and the target group of pupils shifted to nominated pupils from year 9.

The College Principal expressed considerable reservations about the change in direction of the Project and the change in emphasis of the Curriculum Development Worker post. What is held to have been lost is the curriculum element linked to the needs of the Community College as identified in the post-Ofsted Action Plan. The opportunity to contribute to the overall review and development of the practice in the College would have impacted all pupils. The targeting of a small number of pupils with severe attendance problems is seen, at best, as peripheral and, at worst, as indirectly contributing to deteriorating relationships with the Area Strategy. While accepting the Curriculum Development Worker's dedication to local issues and the positive response of local residents to her 'social worker' role, there is some anger at what is seen as a seizure of the agenda. Where there is a more positive response to the Project, for example from the Head of Year 9 within the college and the Education Welfare Officer (EWO), this is couched in specific terms which acknowledge success with individual pupils in terms of improved attitude and a degree of re-integration into school. There is agreement, however, that there are issues to do with target group selection including the geographical limit set, base location and curriculum content which need to be resolved.

The Aims and Objectives of the Attendance Project

The proposal for the Attendance Project (in the March 1996 Report of the Project Worker) described the Project as responding to the issues of non-attendance by working on a multi-agency basis with relevant agencies. In particular, it envisaged targeting:

- Young people who do not attend school and live in the local area;
- Parents who have concerns regarding their children's education and future progression routes.

Although the proposal for the Project appears to have been slightly modified since that time, essentially the Attendance project aimed to re-integrate, where possible, young people who live in the area back into mainstream education. The October/November report of the Project Worker elaborated this by stating that "Project objectives include:

- improving school attendance;
- developing student self esteem/confidence;
- developing knowledge, skills and understanding needed to make informed choice;
- co-ordination/provision of services and resources for individual students;
- provision of an appropriate curriculum;
- continued support for young people upon their reintegration back into education;
- developing links and providing support for parents/guardians".

These are a clear statement of the criteria by which the work of the Project might be judged.

The Main Features of the Work of the Project

The Project is physically based in a Support Centre building; a facility available to the local community and involved in a number of locally-based projects. The young people who attend are referred to the Project by staff at the Community College. The Project Worker makes contact with these young people and their families through home visits where action plans are discussed. There appears to be no pressure on the young people to agree to attend the Project. Once involved in the Project there are a number of features of the work that affects them:

1. Group Sessions. There are two group sessions a week. The main focus of these sessions is to:

- develop confidence and self esteem;
- provide opportunities to develop transferable skills.

The October/November Report of the Project Worker describes the format of these sessions thus:

Each session usually begins with group members recording their attendance at school and at the project and is an opportunity to discuss how each student is coping in and out of school. This is usually followed by playing several social skill games to relax and establish a working atmosphere (with) ... the work concentrated on a range of social/life skill exercises using a wide range of resources. ... The use of games, discussion and role-play were also used to stimulate and deepen issues being explored.

An outdoor activities programme was also developed. The activities included:

- problem solving activities
- team building activities
- climbing
- raft building
- camping (with night games)
- waterfall jumping
- orienteering
- caving
- archery

There was also a video project.

2. Individual Sessions. These sessions enable counselling and help with the negotiation of individual action plans for monitoring progress and setting achievable targets. Although there have been several planned sessions, these consist mostly of informal talks usually at the beginning and end of sessions, during home visits or at other times when the opportunity presents.

3. Literacy Sessions. Some of the young people who do not attend school at all receive individual literacy sessions at the Support Centre. This has also included appropriate life skill teaching to encourage transferable skills that will be relevant beyond school.

4. Home Visits. Maintaining contact with the families of the young people involved with the Project has been an important feature of the work as a means of developing understandings and of planning strategies for the future.

A project such as the Attendance Project does not exist in abstract but has to exist and develop in relation to a pre-existing context. To some extent the former will be shaped by the latter and is impossible to fully understand without some knowledge of the wider picture. This section has sought to portray that wider picture. In the next section we discuss the operation of the Attendance Project.

Section 2

The Attendance Project in action

In this section we report and discuss how the Attendance Project operates. We do this in relation to the most significant features of the Project as we see them, using the accounts provided by those concerned with the Project. These features are the nature and scale of the problem of non-attendance, the target groups and the criteria for referral, the young people and their families and the Project programme. Each section describes, interprets and, where possible, explains issues that have emerged from the study.

The Nature and Scale of the Problem of non-attendance

Statistics relating to school attendance provide a clear picture of the problem faced in the West of the City. The City itself has one of the worst attendance records in the country (6th from the bottom of the Secondary Schools league in 1995-6). Furthermore, the problem appears to be worsening slightly in that, whilst the overall attendance figure for the LEA remained the same for both 1994-5 and 1995-6 at 86.6%, the unauthorised absences increased from 1.9% to 2.0%. This compares with a national picture of a 90.6% attendance rate and unauthorised absences running at 1.0% for 1995-6.

Although the Community College does not have the worst attendance figures in the City, at 73.1% it has the second worst, with unauthorised absences running at 6.1% (i.e., over three times the LEA rate and over six times the national rate). It is worth pointing out, however, that both nationally and locally, schools in deprived areas (especially those in areas with long term unemployment) have more problems of attendance than other schools. This, of course, should not detract from the interesting research finding (O'Keefe, 1994) that secondary students' perception of the ease with which they could truant reflected significant difference in actual attendance rates (a 7.7% difference between 'easy' and 'hard' schools). It has been beyond the brief of this study to explore this issue in relation to the particular area, or the LEA.

In the context of many job losses during the 1980's and the 1991 riots, the focus area declined as deprivation and unemployment increased. Such changes will inevitably impact on the lives of young people in this community, and now it has high school non-attendance rates, youth unemployment and youth crime. Few young people stay on at school. The school staying on rate for 17 year olds is, at 27%, one of the lowest in the City.

Not surprisingly, then, there was general agreement among all the people with whom we were able to talk during the research that non-attendance in the area was an important issue needing to be addressed. Members of the Youth Strategy were particularly concerned about young people in their area and described how, when setting up the youth strategy, they were especially aware that:

... there was very little to offer young people.

Having resided in the area for many years, the strategy members to whom we spoke had witnessed the changes that had taken place in their community. They described how they were acutely aware that young people in the area were being neglected and that there were:

... plenty of kids wandering round the streets when they were supposed to be at school.

Members of the Youth Strategy were extremely positive, therefore, about the Attendance Project. They welcomed it as a project which was community-based and which aimed to establish a link between young people, their parents and the local school.

Similarly, the Curriculum Development Worker acknowledged that non-attendance in the area was a huge problem and, perhaps inevitably, echoed the positive reaction towards the Project noted above. The Curriculum Development Worker, having trained as a teacher and worked as a youth worker, had also worked with schools and parents in the area. She described how there was not a negative reaction to education *per se* but that young people considered they were not "*being listened to*" at school and that negative experiences of schooling, such as being bullied and large class sizes, led to disillusionment and non-attendance.

A similar view was expressed by a youth worker, who worked alongside the Curriculum Development Worker and the young people on the Project. He had first-hand experience of witnessing young people "*hanging around the streets*" during school hours, concluding, therefore, that non-attendance was a problem in the area that needed to be tackled. The youth worker acknowledged that across the whole of the area young people face many problems, such as poor access to jobs and training, high levels of poverty and chaotic home environments. Non-attendance, then, is just one of the many issues and problems which are part of the lives of many young people in the area.

The young people participating in the Attendance Project did not speak directly about their views on non-attendance as such, but spoke more generally about

their experiences on the project and the benefits they had gained. All admitted, though, that they had been "out of school" for a considerable length of time and implied that their non-attendance was a problem. Most young people admitted that their time spent out of school (in some cases for two or three years) was not especially positive. Apart from their time spent at the Attendance Project, several young people described how they rarely left the house during school hours and so had little contact with young people who were not involved in the Project.

When questioned about their future prospects and life beyond the Project, all the young people admitted that an education was important and that they wanted to return to school. Only then, they claimed, would they have any chance of getting a job. One boy told us:

I want to get a job, I don't know what exactly, but know I've got to get an education...

Target Groups and Criteria for Referral

As originally stated, the aim of the Project was to target young people (years 7, 8 and 9) who did not attend school and parents who had concerns about their children's education. Participation is voluntary and referrals are via the Community College. However, as the Curriculum Development Worker pointed out, there was a distinct difference in the targeting and referral criteria than was originally planned. The Curriculum Development Worker defined the proposed referral criteria as:

Young people who attended school erratically rather than long-term non-attenders.

The Curriculum Development Worker gave examples of such 'erratic attenders' as those pupils who might miss school for a week, or pupils who would attend school for one afternoon or one morning. Post-registration truancy was also included.

This distinction, between erratic attenders and non-attenders, appears to have been lost during the referral process. The Head of Year 9 at the Community College referred 21 young people to the Project, of these 11 attended the Project, usually consistently, at some point. According to the Curriculum Development Worker, however, the original intention of working with erratic attenders "*hasn't worked out like that*" and the project has, in fact, been working with six 'erratic attenders' and five 'non-attenders'.

The Curriculum Development Worker described how the referral process actually worked:

The young people referred weren't erratic attenders, but were kids who were truants, who didn't want to be at school. They weren't expelled, or weren't necessarily disruptive - they just didn't want to go.

Some of the referrals to the Project had not, in fact, attended school at all for some time. One boy had not attended school for three years; another for two. The Curriculum Development Worker maintains that she believed that all referrals being made were erratic attenders rather than truants.

Members of the Youth Strategy believed that the Attendance Project targeted the appropriate young people; those who were too young to participate in the Bridge Course and who had complicated home lives. They admitted, too, that the Project was particularly suitable for those young people who had been long-term non-attenders and who spent considerable time "stood on the streets":

The young people fall by the wayside and tend to get the blame for anything that happens on the estate. People seem to see a gang of young people and feel vulnerable or threatened.

According to the Strategy members, the Project helped to bridge this widening gap between young people and members of the local community. In addition, they recognised the importance of targeting young people in the community and believed strongly that the Project should be community-based. They were adamant that the Project made links between the community and the school, suggesting that it was essential for members of the community to take part in school activities because:

... you don't just take the kids to school and dump them at the door, and don't take any more interest, you need to take an interest and be part of the school as well as the school being part of the community.

In relation to the specific referral criteria and the targeting of young people to the project, members of the Strategy were anxious that the Attendance Project should be available to a wider but younger age group. They also felt that it should not be confined to the Community College alone, but should be available to other young people in the West of the city.

The youth worker believed that the Attendance Project catered for those young people who really needed help. Rather than be confined to a specific age group, he spoke more in general about young people who did not "get a fair crack at the whip" concerning education. According to the youth worker, it was the specific

problems each young person may face which may contribute to non-attendance at school. These were important:

... some of them have had pretty horrific bullying experiences, some have got chaotic home situations - in the attendance project these problems tend to be much more at the front because they (the specific problems) may have contributed to them not going to school.

This youth worker had considerable experience of working with young people on the streets of the area and was very much aware of the many problems which young people could face. In school, however, he believed that problems such as a chaotic home-life, poverty, and so on, can be ignored - however unintentionally:

... teachers don't seem to have much understanding or take much notice of problems, especially home problems. They look after the majority, and these kids tend to get overlooked.

The youth worker believed, then, that the attendance project targeted the 'minority' group of young people for whom the school might not have the time, nor the resources, to cater for.

The Young People and their Families

As we have already mentioned, the eleven young people who joined the Attendance Project did not match the original referral criteria exactly. The group comprised of seven females and four males, who all lived in the area and had been attending the Community College. We were able to interview five of the young people - three girls and two boys. The two boys had not attended school for two or three years, and the girls had been attending school erratically.

Schooling patterns were very similar among the young people we interviewed. All had attended a nursery or play school and all reported a positive, happy experience. For the majority of the group, primary school was also a happy time. All but one young person said they had full attendance at primary school, enjoyed the work and liked the teachers. One boy told us that on a few occasions he had been suspended from primary school because he was fighting - a defence he maintains, as a result of being constantly bullied and "picked on".

Through our discussions with the young people accessing the Attendance Project, we became very much aware that non-attendance was not the only factor that each person had in common. The range of agencies which had been involved in some way with members of the sample was vast. These included the

Education Welfare Service, Social Services, Juvenile Justice, Young People's Unit and Education Support Services. Family background was similar too; none of their parents had jobs at that time, and a frequent comment by the young people was that they could not remember a time when their parents were working.

Home life for the young people can only be described as 'chaotic' for a variety of reasons. We were startled to discover that each young person, or their family (or both), faced a collection of problems ranging from poor housing (one young person was one of nine living in a three bedroom house) to drug/alcohol abuse. In this sense, although the young people had no relationship other than they were attending the same project, they did, in fact, have very similar home environments. Non-attendance appeared to be common among family members. Most of the young people described how their siblings did not fully attend school. One boy told us his sister was also being bullied at the Community College and, as a result, she too, had been attending erratically. One other young person told us her sister was attending the Bridge Course.

Bullying, or rather being bullied, was also an experience shared by several of the young people. Experiences were particularly acute among the boys we interviewed, who described horrific bullying experiences, which on one occasion, resulted in hospital treatment. These experiences clearly were the primary influences in their non-attendance.

Interviews with the mothers of four of the pupils confirmed the impressions given by the young people of the acute difficulties of life in one of the city's most socially deprived areas. By any measure, both the youngsters and their families are confronted, on a daily basis, with a range of problems which are clearly of a complexity which appears to render them virtually irresolvable. This was presumably recognised in the original intentions of the initiative as demonstrated by the number of agencies and individuals featured in early discussions and the aim of developing a co-ordinated approach to problems such as drug abuse.

The four mothers who came to the Project centre to be interviewed were clients of several agencies including Social Services, the Probation Service, the Housing Department and voluntary projects. None of the families could be described as 'regular' although they appeared representative, in terms of social indicators, of a significant proportion of the families in the locality. A set of common factors ran through the stories the women told the interviewers. Each of them spoke openly and willingly with a bare minimum of prompts.

The young people were growing up in lone parent households, in most cases with their mothers, and had erratic contact with their fathers. One mother with two teenage girls was living in a communal house under the auspices of an

alcohol rehabilitation project having lost her council house because of alcohol problems.

Three of the families had several children and in each case most of the children presented problems. One boy had four siblings and all were causes for concern apart from the four-month-old baby. One was in residential care and the oldest, at 17, had no job and was in trouble for attempted theft and house breaking. Another girl had an older sister who was on the Bridge Course having moved between two Secondary Schools and failed to attend either. A second family had four children who were all at different schools. The three secondary age pupils had all moved schools after incidents involving fighting.

Ill-health was a thread that ran through all the families, with long term ear problems a common feature. In one case the child had suffered from hearing problems from the age of two and had not received treatment until she was eight; not surprisingly she could barely read or write at this point. Another boy had a perforated ear-drum which was about to be operated on and one of the girls constantly missed school through ear infections. Her mother was herself waiting for surgery that would repair the damage of a life time of ear infections. A second mother had long term kidney problems that prevented her from working although neither she nor her estranged husband had worked for a long time.

Unemployment was a common feature and, for each of the women, the possibility of any sort of job was remote. Behind this pattern of long term unemployment was the shared characteristic of lack of qualifications which, in three of the cases, was linked to poor school attendance. One woman had worked as a play worker for seven years before an instance of family child abuse, compounded by instances of further abuse in her work environment, precipitated her descent into alcoholism. Ill-health was a strong contributory factor making the four women virtually unemployable.

Poverty had both underpinned and undermined the daily lives of the families and this was acutely felt by the women as their children became more acquisitive and competitive as they grew up. One mother was anticipating a fine following a Court appearance for not sending her only daughter to school. She thought she could pay this off at £2 a week that would add up to nearly £4 with the cost of the bus fare into the City centre to deliver the money. Her daughter was the third generation of non-attenders in this particular family. Their fragile family finances had been decimated before Christmas when their house was burgled and stripped of anything vaguely saleable. Not having any insurance, she had now to repay a loan given by Social Services to replace essential items. Burglary is a regular feature of life in the area and there were examples given to us where

the families we are describing were both the perpetrators and victims of theft in one form or another.

A key question centred on issues of non-attendance. In describing the patterns of attendance that had brought their children into the Project, the women interviewed picked out some recurrent features. Early problems with health, mainly undetected hearing problems, had negatively affected reading and writing in three cases. One boy was unable to read when he left primary school and his mother claims this had not been noticed. The girl with hearing problems could barely read and write and had a series of *"rubbish reports"*. In all cases moving up to the *"big school"* marked a turning point in a previously reasonable attendance pattern. Feelings towards the Community College ranged from *"didn't like it"* to *"hated it"* and being *"totally miserable"*. Low academic attainment and erratic attendance was accompanied by bullying; ending in complete non-attendance. In three of the cases this took the form of parentally condoned absence. The mothers interviewed quoted other young people in the area with equally bad or even worse attendance. They compared notes on procedures and likely outcomes of Court appearances. Truancy is not regarded as a particularly shameful fact and there are apparently always other young people around to keep each other company.

The Attendance Project Programme

When asked about their views of the Attendance Project as a whole, the young people responded very positively. Each person talked at length about their favourite parts of the Project, the activities they liked doing the most and, briefly, about aspects of the Project of which they were not so enthusiastic.

In regards to specific special activities such as the Video Project, the reaction from the young people was unwaveringly positive. Each person described how he or she had various roles, responsibilities and levels of involvement in the whole project. The young people were particularly appreciative of the fact that they had a choice in what they did or could contribute to the project. One girl, for instance, was not keen on appearing in front of the camera and while this could have led to exclusion, she took on the role of developing a script and directing the filming.

The process of making the video appeared to be important to the young people who spoke at length about their various roles in the film. The video was also important to the young people by virtue of the fact that it aimed to tackle the issue of bullying. This was pertinent to the lives of several of the young people -

and the school - and the young people believed strongly that their experiences could be used to convey a valuable message. One boy told us:

... I've got to act - I'm good at that. It's about school, and what we think about school. We talk about bullying and what it can do to people and it will get shown at the school when we've finished it.

Equally as important as the process of being involved in the making of the video was the fact that the end product, the film itself, would be a clear and tangible outcome with a valid message for the Community College and members of the Youth Strategy:

It's going to get shown to the school and the people that work here [Support Centre], just to prove to them why we've been running around the building and to the school that we're doing something worthwhile while we're here.

The residential trip was another aspect of the Project that the young people talked about at length. Here the emphasis was very much placed on physical activities and included rock climbing, hiking, camping and waterfall jumping. Although all the young people said they enjoyed the programme immensely, there was a clear difference between the girls and the boys that we interviewed. Among the boys, the positive features were the physically-demanding activities, especially the waterfall jumping. One boy described the waterfall jumping as "fun" and another described this as the best part of the Project for him personally:

Jumping off the rocks into the water from the highest bit. That was really good, because nobody else would dare do it at first ... I've got confidence, me, so once I had done it then everyone else dared to do it.

In sharp contrast, however, was the reaction of the girls we spoke to about their experiences of the residential course. One girl told us:

It was horrible. We had to jump in waterfalls, it was horrible, it was in September ... I didn't enjoy any of it.

Another girl described how difficult she found rock climbing and recounted a time when she physically was so scared she became stuck and "had to be rescued". On a positive note, however, the girls told us how they enjoyed all the other aspects of going on the residential trips; the night games, working as a team and the camping and cooking. The benefits of such experiences of group work and team-building activities were described in a positive light by all the young people to whom we spoke. One girl described how she now found it easier to talk to people because she felt more confident and was even arranging the next

weekend trip away to Blackpool. One boy told us how much he liked working as a team because *"you get to know people better that way"*.

In addition to these group work and team activities, the Attendance Project offers one-to-one contact (with the Curriculum Development Worker) to a young person who needs it. Work during this time includes literacy classes, counselling and identifying and working towards individual action plans. This feature of the Attendance Project was again regarded as extremely positive by the young people.

Through our discussions with the young people, it became very obvious that they believed large school class sizes were one of the worst features about school. In fact, teaching group sizes at the Community College are relatively small - 18.6 at the time of the Ofsted Inspection - and, it would appear, are even smaller now. Nevertheless, several young people spoke of *"not being heard"* and *"it's too noisy"* at school, and valued the individual attention they received during their one-to-one work with the Curriculum Development Worker. Each young person worked this way to varying degrees, which seemed to be based on individual needs rather than rigid guidelines. One boy, who actually could read very little before he joined the Project, was receiving literacy lessons from the Curriculum Development Worker. For this particular boy, who had been absent from school for three years, the work was invaluable and was an important part of his contact with the Project:

I've learnt all kinds of different stuff. ...[the Curriculum Development Worker] ... gave me this ghost book and I had to read all the way through it before I could copy off it, I finished that and learnt some stuff, like learning to spell, and learnt how to read magazines.

This young person went on to describe a special project which he was completing on an individual basis. This was a Family Album requiring him to take photographs of all his family and write about each member next to the photograph. He was clearly enjoying this project when we spoke to him, and had been showing it to some of his family, although he was keeping it as a surprise Christmas present for his mother.

A main focus to the work undertaken during the Attendance Project appears to be non-curriculum based. One girl described how she had written a letter - using an electronic type-writer - to the Chairperson of the Youth Strategy. This was the first time she had attempted something like this and was initially reluctant to attempt it. Despite this, she completed the task and was pleased when she received a reply from the Chairperson. This, the young person admitted, was a

skill which she had learnt from the Project, that she felt would help her later on her life:

... I know how to use a computer and that. I know how to work cameras. I didn't have any confidence, I'm always quiet, but that was worse when I was at school. It's better here ...

Attendance at the Attendance Project Programme

The nature of the programme does not lend itself to easily quantifiable figures for attendance. Participants joined at different times, returned to school on a partial or full basis or, in one case, left the Project. Thus, for example a 71% attendance rate for the person who left the project masks the fact that this involved attending only 10 group sessions. On the other hand, one of those who returned to school had an attendance rate at Project group sessions of 67% (one of the lowest figures). Registers for the twice weekly group sessions show a range of from 50%-93%, with three of the young people recording over 90% attendance.

It would appear, then, that the Attendance Project does cater for a group who would benefit from some form of educational intervention beyond that normally available in school. Furthermore, the young people and their families involved in the project seem to value the experience. In the next section we turn to the outcomes of the project.

Section 3

The outcomes of the Attendance Project

In this section we consider the outcomes of the Attendance Project. It is worth remembering that, for various reasons, the Project has been operational in the form described in this report for a matter of months rather than years. It is at an early stage, and commenting on the educational impact of this particular scheme really requires a longer term perspective than that available to the evaluation team. As noted in Section One of this report, the Project had been set up with a twin focus on young people and on parents. It is in relation to those two groups, therefore, that we wish to concentrate the discussion in this section. We begin with the parents because they have both a specific legal duty and a key role in ensuring school attendance. We then make some comments on what is currently happening to the young people involved, but recognise that this will be a constantly changing picture.

The Parents of Those Involved in the Project

The four mothers interviewed spoke very positively about the impact the Project was having on their children and the support they themselves were receiving from the Curriculum Development Worker and the Education Welfare Officer (EWO). The role of the EWO has clearly been a pivotal one in initiating and sustaining communications between the Project, the families and the Community College. The fact that the EWO had worked in the area for some time and had established good working relationships with the Year Tutor and with 'at-risk' pupils and their families, strengthened the key role she played in the Project. Parents recognised and appreciated the information and support they received in deciding to become involved in the Project.

In talking more specifically about any observed changes in their children, the mothers were careful to explain the state both they and the children had reached at the point they became involved, and the gradual process of acceptance and further commitment that took place.

One of the girls, with perhaps the most worrying attendance record, had taken six months to get to the point of a partial return to school, no doubt partly prompted by an imminent Court case. Her mother said that her daughter was "*far from stupid*" and "*brilliant at art*" and the Project had worked on these glimmers of hope to build up her confidence. She also acknowledged that strong local and personal factors acted against the efforts of the Project, namely the

number of other young people who were not in school, as well as her daughter's determination to get a job and abandon all thoughts of education.

A second mother elaborated the difficulties her son faced simply in taking the first step and physically entering the Project base in the 'Pink Palace'. She described the build up of visits by the EWO, the discussions with the Head of Year at the Community College and the struggle to get him to attend the Project. Again, the Curriculum Development Worker had identified the glimmer of hope in the boy's wish to go to another college where he has friends. The Project was supporting him in building up a better attendance record while at the same time working on his low level of literacy. His mother thought that she had "*caught that little bugger reading*", although he is classed as a non-reader. She described the Curriculum Development Worker as "*very supportive, the best I've had so far*" and spoke appreciatively of the home visits when she would talk about her son and plan the next step. Once more the mother talked about the local pull factors which militate against the Project, particularly the number of young people who hang around the nearby pub in school time. A significant local feature is what she described as the "*code of honour*" which presumed that any one going into the Pink Palace was "*grassing*" and that other kids would "*get him*" when he came out. The boy was due in court on criminal charges so the threats were perceived as far from empty.

The mother of one of the girls spoke of her continuing struggle to gain any sort of response from her daughter on school matters, apart from a characteristic "*shrug of the shoulders*" and the response that "*school's boring!*". She described her daughter as a "*good reader and reasonable at maths*" but with a history of post-registration truancy. Since joining the Project her attendance had improved and she had "*opened up and started to talk*". She talked about what was happening on the Project and planning for the trip to Blackpool. The girl was living with her father in another area and, at the time of the interview, her mother did not think she was going to school. The Curriculum Development Worker kept in touch with both parents, making frequent visits to the mother who had no telephone.

The fourth mother also spoke very positively about the impact of the Project and the supportive collaborative link between the Head of Year, the Education Welfare Officer and the Curriculum Development Worker. She came for the interview accompanied by her social worker and was clearly in a vulnerable emotional and physical state. Her two daughters' truancy had been one of a series of severe family problems and she worried constantly about her daughters' whereabouts when not in school. Since attending the Project, her attendance had picked up and her mother had noticed her reading a day trip brochure. Previously she had "*never seen her read anything and wouldn't think she would ever bother to pick up anything to read*". The mother felt reassured knowing

that, while on the Project, her daughter *"was safe and was learning and liking what she was doing"*. The Curriculum Development Worker kept in close contact with the mother *"writing little notes"* and *"wishing her a happy New Year"*.

It would seem, therefore, that in relation to the parents, the Attendance Project has the following outcomes. It has:

- managed to involve at least some of the parents in what happens to their children at the Project. Many of these are unlikely to have been involved previously in their school life;
- helped as a catalyst for the other support agencies working with the young people and their families; and
- provided some tangible signs of progress in the education of their children for the parents.

The Young People Involved in the Project

As was noted in Section 2 of this report, the young people involved in the Project do not represent a homogenous group but a collection of individuals, each of whom represents a nexus for a variety of factors which impact on school attendance. Inevitably, then, the work of the Project has been differential in its effects upon them. Essentially, however, we identified four categories of response in terms of attendance and reintegration into schooling.

First, there are those young people, all girls, who are back in school. Clearly, for them this is not the end of the story but the beginning of another chapter. What will be of interest in the longer term will be the extent to which they both sustain and benefit from re-integration into the process of schooling.

Second, there are those who either are already back at school on a partial timetable and also attending some of the Project sessions, or who are scheduled to do so very soon. As with the above group, only time will tell whether this moves towards full re-integration and is sustained.

Third, there are those who are still involved only with the Project and for whom this represents their only route at the moment into education. This does not mean, of course, that they are not working towards some form of re-integration, although not necessarily into, the Community College.

Finally, there are the very small minority for whom the Project does not seem to have worked and who no longer attend.

Turning to academic performance through involvement in the Project, the picture is less clear. Through both the self-reports of the young people themselves and the corroborating anecdotal evidence supplied by their mothers, we can report that there is a perception of improvement in literacy. This is not supported by any data produced through the measurement of a test of any type. We consider this not to have been a feasible course of action for several reasons that are described more fully in Appendix 1. Nevertheless, we would remind the reader that absence of evidence is not the same as evidence of absence.

It would seem, therefore, that in relation to the young people involved, the Attendance Project has the following outcomes. It has:

- improved the school attendance of the majority of the participants, including re-integrating several back into mainstream education;
- provided continued support for the young people upon their re-integration back into education;
- developed the self esteem and confidence of many of the young people; and
- contributed to a perception of improvement in the literacy of some of the young people.

The Cost of the Project

The post of Curriculum Development Worker was not full-time, but 0.75%. As well as the salary costs (including on-costs) for this post, there were a number of other costs. These included a payment of £1,500 per year to the Support Centre for administrative support, a budget for the worker, travel and training costs. The running costs for the Project, as supplied by the LEA, are £14,163 for 1995-6 and £19,871 for 1996-7, i.e., a total of £34,034.

The Attendance Project, therefore, would appear to have achieved some identifiable outcomes in relation to both young people and their parents during the time that it has been operating. In the next section, we present our overall conclusions.

Section 4

Conclusion

In this Section we present our overall conclusions, point up the central issue as we see it for the EAS Management Group and offer some recommendations. In doing so we go back to the brief set for the evaluation team, namely to evaluate the Attendance Project against the aims and objectives established for it when set up. We include a consideration both of the wider context of the Educational Achievement Strategy and of 'value for money'.

Evaluating the Attendance Project in Relation to its Aims and Objectives

The research sought to evaluate the work of the Attendance Project against its own terms of reference. As was pointed out in Section One, the aims and objectives set in the documentation provide a clear statement of the criteria by which the work of the Project might be judged. In these terms, despite the short time-scale of the Project, it has been successful, and this success is acknowledged by the stakeholders consulted during the evaluation. The issue of the 'provision of an appropriate curriculum' is the only one of the criteria where there would be debate. Here the issue is what constitutes 'appropriateness'? Schools are legally bound to deliver the National Curriculum, but this may be associated with failure or boredom for some pupils. Furthermore, without literacy and numeracy the National Curriculum may remain inaccessible for some pupils. The curriculum, however, is also constituted by the way in which it is delivered and, for some pupils at least, this may be crucial in their learning. We return to the implications of this later.

Evaluating the Attendance Project in Relation to the Wider Context of the Educational Achievement Strategy

Where there is criticism of the Attendance Project, this relates to the wider frame of the LEA policy on attendance, the overall work of the EAS and the specific agendas of the Curriculum Development Worker, the Strategy and the Community College. Three facts emerge in stark outline.

The geographical focus for the research is a hard place in which to live and the local community, through the Strategy, is committed to tackling the complex, deeply rooted problems of the area and of its young residents. Hard core truancy is a problem which will not go away and if ignored will build up problems

which will simply re-appear in a more serious manifestation in the community. We have seen this in the second and third generation of family problems encountered in the course of this small scale research.

The Community College has its own internal agenda for implementing the Action Plan designed to get the College out of the special measures required by Ofsted. The new Principal is concerned to put in place effective strategies for raising the quality of education provided for all its pupils. The opening of the new Access Centre and the curriculum reviews play a central role in this. Decisions have to include the amount of effort and resourcing that can be directed at the ten to fifteen percent of chronic non-attenders who feature in attendance statistics.

The Curriculum task set by the original remit of the Curriculum Development Worker post was an enormous undertaking, requiring significant knowledge of curriculum content and of the process of implementation. With hindsight, it was almost inevitable that the work of this EAS project officer would require refinement and refocusing. Unfortunately, this very process brought to the surface some very real differences in ideological approaches to the problem that were not resolved. To a large extent, this relates back to definitions of the nature and scale of the problem and, therefore, to the type of provision that might be deemed appropriate. This debate is not merely a local one. There are concerns about the dangers in providing special provision for those who have not succeeded, for whatever reason, in mainstream provision. Some flavour of the debate is captured by the term "*goodies for baddies*" (Learmonth, 1995) sometimes used for such provision.

The EAS is a complex approach to the fundamental problems of part of the city and is dependent upon the synergy of its various interlocking strands. That is why 'partnership' was a crucial part of its processes. The post of Curriculum Development Worker was intended to be part of this overall strategic approach. As such it encountered a similar range of conceptual and implementation problems to those found elsewhere in the Strategy as a whole and which are documented in the EAS Evaluation Report. In the case of the Curriculum Development Worker post, however, this evolved into more or less a single worker project with all the drawbacks this type of set-up entails.

In terms of its contribution to the success of the overall EAS Project, any evaluation must conclude that the impact of the Attendance Project is negligible. There appears to have been no input, for whatever reason, into the review and development of the curriculum at the Community College nor of its pastoral and student support systems. Given the size of the attendance problem and the cultural and structural dimensions of schooling that influence non-attendance

this is a glaring omission. We cannot but conclude that our study confirms the finding of Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh, (1992) that "... *there is much pain, hurt and suffering around current educational arrangements*" (p. 159). As such, although it may be difficult to confront the implications of doing so, without tackling these cultural and structural issues, the problems of countless other young people may remain unaddressed.

Evaluating the Project in Terms of Value for Money

The issue of 'value for money' is complex. It would be impossible to do a complete cost-benefit analysis since these are always comparative. They require the definition of alternatives to be compared and an identification of the limits of the comparison. The potential here for alternatives range from mainstream schools through special schools to pupil referral units. The limits might extend beyond schooling into adulthood and include categories of effects such as employment, involvement in crime and delinquency, dependence on welfare and social services, and so on. Although it is easy to assign monetary values to project costs, it is far more difficult to accurately estimate the monetary value of its benefits. The discussion in this section can, therefore, only be tentative.

Ofsted inspections of schools use a summative judgement of value for money, which relates the educational standards achieved and the quality of education provided to the income of the school, taking into account appropriate contextual factors and using comparisons with similar schools. The data does not exist to make informed judgements about the educational standards achieved nor of any 'value added' by the Project. Even if it did, the time-scale of the few months of operation of the Project as a teaching-learning process might not take sufficient account of the sorts of 'learning curves' that, it might be argued, could be anticipated with such young people. Furthermore, the contextual factors needing to be taken into account are those of a very atypical group of learners.

Comparisons are somewhat easier, although still this is not comparing like with like. The running costs for this Project are higher than those for the Bridge Course, which involves nothing more than a teacher's salary. The unit costs per pupil at the Project during this academic year are £1,806.45. On one level, this seems to compare reasonably favourably with unit costs for Year 9 pupils of £1,761.63 across the whole of the LEA and £2,331.82 for the Community College. However, it should be borne in mind that:

1. The Attendance Project only operates for part of the week. Even taking a generous interpretation of pupils having 0.75 education per week in the Project, for a full week of education it could exceed the unit costs even of

the Community College (a *pro rata* conversion would suggest a figure of £2,408.60);

2. The actual unit costs for each of the pupils should include their unit costs at the Community College where they are included on the roll. This is regardless of whether they actually attend the College or not. This would suggest that the actual unit costs for each of the young people involved in the Project is more like a figure of £4,138.27.

3. Turning to pupil: teacher ratio, again there are a number of complicating factors. The Project has a ratio of 11:1 but, essentially, the pupils only attend part-time. The Community College had a ratio of 13.9:1 at the time of the Ofsted report (although the ratio may now be closer to that of the Project) but, according to the same report, the average teaching group size was 18.6. According to Learmonth (1995), these pupil: teacher ratios are typical of those found in units working with 'hard-core' non-attenders.

Perhaps, the most critical factor is to consider what else might have been done with the available resource and its likely impact on educational outcomes. Might, for example, these young people have reasonably been educated in special provision on the school site? This would have saved some costs if it had been possible but would have affected only the attendees. In relation to the same group of pupils, time for form tutors to visit the families and develop supportive relationships might have been funded. This would have enhanced the knowledge of staff who had to support the pupils in the school context. Alternatively, strategies might have been developed that had wider effects than these particular pupils, impacting upon the rest of the school population at the College. The funding of a review and development of the College's curriculum and pedagogy, for example, might have achieved the necessary structural and cultural changes which would have made schooling more attractive not only to these eleven pupils but also to many others. Similarly, releasing the Community College teachers for high quality professional development might have been a possibility given that the Project costs would have funded nearly 300 days of teacher supply cover.

Taking a longer-term perspective, the more fundamental problems of the area might have been effectively tackled in a preventative way through early childhood intervention programmes. Little longitudinal research into the economic consequences of such programmes has been undertaken in this country although there is some evidence from the North American context. The Perry Pre-school Project, for example, had a primary aim of preventing adolescent delinquency and school drop out amongst 'high risk' children. The

longitudinal studies (Weikart *et al.*, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1993), involving experimental and control groups, suggest that participants were more likely to be receptive learners at school, socially responsible, and less likely to be involved in criminal activity in later years. A cost-benefit analysis estimated that, by age 19, there was a benefit-cost ratio of \$7.18 returned for every dollar invested and at age 27 this cost effectiveness was maintained. The £34,000 invested in the Attendance Project, if invested in such programmes for three and four year olds in the area, might have improved responses to schooling, improved employment prospects, and reduced both crime and social service support. In relation to the effective use of available funding for tackling the educational priorities of the area, then, and the other ways in which that funding might have been used (of which only a few possibilities have been outlined), it would be reasonable to conclude that the Project does not represent value for money.

The Central Issue for Consideration

Pupils respond in different ways to the experience of schooling. One of the problems that we have is to explain the considerable variation that occurs in both their responses to educational processes and their educational achievement. Non-attendance is one of the variations that, as yet, remains large on rhetoric but short on effective action. Learning is very much influenced by context and, by the same token, 'learning failures' may be failures of context. The difficulty is deciding what aspects of the context are involved in this. In a sense, the 'context' is best seen as a 'nested concept' in which different levels require different types of decision and of action but where the possibilities for action and the constraints upon it at any particular level are often influenced by what happens at other levels (see Figure 2). Tackling the problem of non-attendance, therefore, is helped when these actions at different level work together and create a synergy.

At a basic level the classroom, for example, is the context in which somehow or other what has taken place between a particular pupil and his/her teacher has failed to create a framework for learning to develop. This may involve elements of the provision, of the materials, or of the ways of teaching that are inappropriate for at least some of the pupils. At another level is the school, where such things as the procedures, structures and geography may fail a pupil. Pasternicki *et al.* (1993), for example, point out that geographical and registration systems problems within a school can promote truancy and evade detection and addressing how students leave and how they can be more effectively monitored could reduce the problem. At another level is the community in which the school is located where we find social, cultural and even physical characteristics that work against school attendance. Casey and Smith (1995), for example, identify various common factors linking truants: low socio-economic status, single parent

families or being in care, living in council accommodation, being black. At yet another level is the LEA which has a long-term, co-ordinated, multi-level strategy for approaching the problem of attendance but, in seeking to implement it, has to consider national policy, including resourcing, the local communities in which attendance is a problem, and so on.

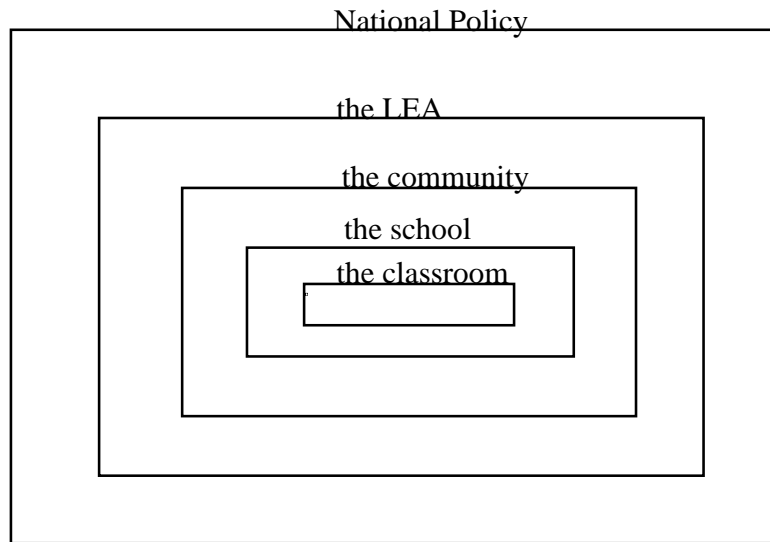


Figure 2.

A 'Nested Model' of the contexts for addressing the problem of non-attendance

Underlying the alteration of focus in the work of the Curriculum Development Worker and the concomitant emergence of the Attendance Project are clear differences in orientation towards the central issue of attendance. Although non-attendance manifests in the individual who needs help and support, that individual is from - and has to return to - a wider context where the structural and cultural issues that impact the individual need to be addressed. The dilemma is more acute when there is pressure on resources. The more different parts of the system can work in a coherent way, the more hope there will be of a sustained impact on the problem.

This last point takes us back to an important issue raised in the main Evaluation Report, namely the meaning of 'partnership'. Given the problems confronting this community and the issues raised in this report, we feel that the only hope for any lasting improvement of the educational and life-chances of these young people is through the active and constructive working together of all agencies involved. A strong sub-text throughout our investigations has been of, at times,

difficult interpersonal relationships influencing responses to key issues. We report this rather than seek retrospective explanations. However, it is as unrealistic to pretend that these do not exist and are unlikely to have influenced developments as it is to pretend that they may not influence the future. We are not suggesting that the pursuit of harmony is more important than the pursuit of informed and critical judgement, we merely wonder whether in this case either have been achieved. It seems inevitable that a range of perspectives will exist on a complex problem such as non-attendance. In retrospect, the fact that this conflict of ideas was resolved by, in effect, concentrating on this particular group of young people without addressing the fundamental roots of the wider problem of non-attendance seems like a lost opportunity.

Recommendations

In the light of the discussion in this report, we recommend that:

1. Any future work on non-attendance in this area addresses both the problems of particular non-attenders **and** the curricular, pedagogical and pastoral issues within the Community College which will enable returning young people to feel more at ease in the College and more able to access the curriculum.
2. The expertise of teachers within the College and the Learning Support Service be utilised to ensure the highest quality of support available within literacy and numeracy provision for project participants prior to re-integration.
3. The facilities, including the technology, of the Access Centre at the Community College be used actively to support the re-integration of non-attenders.
4. If the Attendance Project continues, the Curriculum Development Worker designs further developments in line with recommendations 1-3 above.
5. If the Attendance Project continues, staff at the Community College should concentrate referrals on erratic attenders rather long-term non-attenders.
6. Serious consideration be given to preventative work in primary schools in order to anticipate and prevent later hard-core absenteeism as this may represent better value for money.

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Appendix 1

The purpose and methodology of the evaluation

The Purpose of the Evaluation

The evaluation team was commissioned by the EAS Project to evaluate the work of the Attendance Project. This was to be carried out against the aims and objectives established for the Attendance Project when it was set up. We have since been asked to include a consideration of 'value for money' which inevitably sets the work within the wider context of the Educational Achievement Strategy.

How the Evaluation was Carried Out

The evaluation was conducted using two main approaches:

1. An analysis of documentation relating to the Attendance Project, including reports prepared by the Project Worker and statistics supplied by the LEA.
2. Semi structured interviews with those involved in the Project. These have been with young people who attended the Project and some of their parents, the Attendance Project Worker, the Youth Worker involved with the Project, the Educational Welfare Officer mostly closely linked with the Project, representatives of the Support Strategy, the EAS Project Manager, the Principal of the Community College and the Head of Year 9 who has liaised with the Project.

Analysis of the data was undertaken in two stages: an initial analysis was done as the data were gathered and a further analysis was undertaken when all data had been gathered. The explanations offered and the issues identified may not be the only ones possible from the available data but they are, in the team's view, the most plausible.

A first draft of the report was discussed with the members of the Management Group who were invited to submit further comment. Three people did so and we have taken these into account in revising the draft.

The Problems of Testing in such an Evaluation

The evaluation was carried out on a Project that had been operational for only a matter of months; the evaluation itself was small-scale. A neat experimental design, using a control group and rigorous testing, was not an option available to the team. First of all, the Project was well underway when we were requested to undertake an evaluation. We would have had no control over the conditions of any previous testing. Secondly, it would be insufficient to use previous test results, even if their administration met our criteria, if the tests did not yield the type of information we required. The central problem in any test is that it is not necessarily learning that is assessed but the performance of some kind of behaviour that is presumed to represent learning. Furthermore, much of learning is not easily quantifiable although some aspects of the 'performance' are. Consequently, aspects such as 'word recognition', 'accuracy when reading' or 'comprehension' might be taken to 'stand for' or 'indicate' reading in a broader and more complex sense. Indeed, one of the major issues in the literacy field is the variety of reading tests exist which do use different 'indicators' as the basis of their measurement. Coherence, then, of testing would have presented some problems and the validity of the results a major one.

Caveats about the Evaluation Report

Inevitably there are caveats that should be made about the evaluation. In particular it should be noted that:

- (1) Interviews as a form of data-gathering are susceptible to many influences such as where the interview takes place and who conducts the interview. This is particularly so with young people and with sensitive issues such as school attendance. This can affect the nature and quality of the data gathered with implications for the validity of the study.
- (2) There has been some debate between the Attendance Project Worker and the evaluation team about the nature and approach of the evaluation. The evaluation team considers that it has sought to gather the perceptions of the various stake-holders in the Project as fully and fairly as possible within the constraints of a small-scale study of this nature. We believe that this debate should not impact the very important issues discussed in the report itself.